

**Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area**

# **Recreational Trail Use Survey**

**Report to the National Park Service**

**March, 2003**



## **Executive summary**

This report discusses the findings of a recreational trail use survey conducted within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, over the weekends of July 13-14 & July 20-21, 2002 and on two weekdays – July 16 & 18, 2002. The survey was undertaken by the Sustainable Cities Program at the University of Southern California under contract with the Western National Parks Association in cooperation with the National Park Service (NPS). The purpose of the survey was to obtain trail user information for the purpose of developing an interagency trail management plan for the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA). The survey was funded by a grant from the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy to the Western National Parks Association. Partners in the plan were the California Department of Parks & Recreation, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and the National Park Service.

### *Sample*

Over the course of the survey 12,388 visitors were counted at 33 park entrances to the National Recreation Area's trail network. Approximately 10% of those counted, 1,228 trail users, were asked to participate in the survey, which was strictly voluntary. Only 242 people out of those approached by surveyors who declined to participate in the survey, resulting in an 80% response rate. This yielded a sample of 986 respondents, of which 912 surveys furnished usable data. Potential respondents were restricted to those visitors who were 18 years or older.

### *Information collected*

In addition to gathering demographic data about trail users, information was collected about their recreational behavior, including visitation rates and recreational activity patterns; their attitudes towards the protection of the Santa Monica Mountains; trail user interaction patterns (user conflicts); travel distance and barriers to access to trails within the NRA.

### *Results*

The dominant trail users were white, middle-aged men (59% of those surveyed were male), who were born in the United States, spoke English, were college-educated, relatively affluent, owned their own homes, did not have children under 18 years of age, and lived in single person households. They typically visited the SMMNRA with friends and were return visitors. People of color and low-income earners were noticeably under-represented in the survey sample. Nevertheless, the survey did reveal considerable variation in park users, particularly with regard to the nationalities of users, with 56 different nations being represented in the data.

### Visitation patterns

Findings highlighted the fact that the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area is a popular year-round recreational destination. An unexpected finding was the high

proportion of respondents who visited the SMMNRA during the summer. Survey results demonstrated that many park users take advantage of the cooler mornings and evenings in the summer months to enjoy the trails. Particular user groups such as picnickers and sightseers were more likely to use the SMMNRA during the summer than other seasons. Winter was the season that many survey respondents reported as their least frequent period of park visitation. The research also revealed that weekend park use was elevated compared to weekday use. It was also clear that many park users were return visitors and that they visited the SMMNRA on average four times a month and the duration of their visit was on average two hours long. Visitors to the SMMNRA typically were accompanied by friends and family or came by themselves. Surprisingly few trail users came with organized groups or religious groups.

### Trail use

Insofar as trail use is concerned, results of the survey have specific implications for trail management. The most frequently reported activity was hiking. Indeed, it clearly outranked all other trail uses. The next most often reported activity was a passive recreational pursuit - sightseeing, followed by mountain biking, jogging and then dog walking. While other activities such as horse riding were undertaken by visitors, they did not represent a large proportion of the sample. Being outdoors was the most frequently listed reason for visiting. Exercising was second, followed by enjoying the scenic beauty of the SMMNRA, getting fresh air, escaping the city and suburbs, communing with nature and socializing.

The National Recreation Area is used by some trail users as if it was a local or neighborhood park – that is, visitors used the park for activities that would normally be undertaken at a local park and not a larger area of regional open space such as the SMMNRA. Indeed, an important finding of the survey was the emergence of a portrait of localized trail use. Many respondents (12.2%) indicated that they did not use their local parks or that the question about local park use was not applicable to them. The low median travel time to the SMMNRA also highlights the residential proximity of trail users. In particular, joggers, equestrians and dog walkers and to some extent mountain bikers all use the SMMNRA on a regular, high frequency basis. Equestrians were the group that most frequently reported never using a local or neighborhood park. It should be noted here that other uses of the SMMNRA such as picnicking did attract users who lived further away from the National Recreation Area.

### Attitudes towards nature

The high level of ecocentricism (attitudes where nature is of highest importance) among surveyed trail users was an unexpected finding of this study. The majority of respondents (53.2%) felt that the preservation of habitat for plants and animals was the most important reason for protecting the Santa Monica Mountains. When this is combined with those respondents who refused to, or were unable to, decide between recreation and habitat protection as the most important reason, over 70% of park users considered the ecological integrity of the Santa Monica Mountains a priority. Only one-fifth of respondents felt that recreation was the most important reason to protect the mountains.

Thus the imperative for maintaining the ecological integrity of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area is unequivocal.

### Sources of knowledge

Corroborating the ecocentrism of trail users was the finding that nature observation was the most frequently cited source of knowledge about plants and animals in the Santa Monica Mountains. Furthermore, trail users involved in active recreation, including equestrians and mountain bikers, relied upon nature observation for their knowledge. Another key finding was the growing importance of the Internet as a source of information for the SMMNRA, with many trail users writing it into the survey as an information source. In addition, a large number of trail users were dependent upon park signs and park brochures for their environmental information.

### Trail user interaction

A key purpose of this survey was to investigate the incidence of conflict between trail users and to attempt to gauge its causes. The majority of respondents reported that their trail experience was affected by the presence of other trail users. For some this impact was positive whereas for others it was not. Nevertheless, all respondents reported either a favorable or at worst slightly below neutral reaction to other trail users activities and behaviors. When comparisons are made between trail users, mountain bikers, picnickers and dog walkers emerged as being less well regarded by other trail users. Mountain biking in particular was the activity that attracted the least favorable responses. On the other hand, hiking received the most positive reviews. The issues that attracted the most concern were uncooperative behavior, leaving animal wastes and litter. Corroborating the evidence of substantial ecocentrism amongst trail users were the results that damaging plants and scaring animals were regarded by many trail users as problematic.

### Mode of travel

The overwhelming majority of respondents to the survey traveled to the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area by private automobile. Public transit was either avoided by visitors to the SMMNRA, or more likely was too difficult and inconvenient as a means of access to the SMMNRA. This may also account for the under-representation of particular socio-economic and race/ethnic groups in the survey.

### Barriers to access

A very low proportion of trail users reported having a physical disability. Although few trail users reported experiencing barriers to access at the trailheads where they were surveyed, a higher percentage (almost 10%) reported experiencing accessibility issues elsewhere within the SMMNRA. However, these barriers related to minor obstacles such as fallen trees across trails or lack of parking in some locations as opposed to concerns over personal safety or access for disabled users.

### *Recommendations*

Management recommendations include: outreach to people of color and low income earners, who were under-represented in the survey; development of an integrated public transportation service to facilitate greater access to the SMMNRA and to reduce the car dependence of trail users; development of a code of conduct for trail users to reduce user conflict; developing multilingual park signs and brochures, particularly in Spanish, Mandarin and Farsi and giving consideration to aged persons facilities, to cater to increasing diversity amongst patrons of the SMMNRA. It is also recommended that trail management planners investigate the feasibility of implementing an animal waste management program within the SMMNRA, which may include mandatory waste receptacles for horses and fines for dog-walkers who do not pick up their pet's droppings.

Issues requiring further research include the anecdotal reports of trail users about criminal behavior at trail heads, particularly car break-ins and drug dealing. Qualitative research such as the use of focus groups could address these and other personal safety issues such as the need for lighting, the provision of secure parking areas and trail safety. Given the poor response to questions on the survey pertaining to barriers to access, further research could also be undertaken into the factors that trail users perceive as constituting impediments to trail use. Finally, residents in the SMMNRA's catchment area who do not visit the SMMNRA should be surveyed to explore barriers to access and other reasons for lack of utilization.

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## **Disclaimer**

This report has been produced for the National Park Service with the express intent of informing their recreational trail-use planning program. Anyone intending to act upon material contained within the report, or the findings of the survey, should first confirm the veracity of those findings. The Sustainable Cities Program at the University of Southern California, the authors, employees and respective agents of the University of Southern California and National Park Service do not accept any responsibility for any injury, loss or damage caused to any person acting or failing to act arising from the use of material contained within this report.

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First published in March 2003.

The National Park Service is on the web at:

<http://www.nps.gov>

For information on the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area:

<http://www.nps.gov/samo>

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Research for the report was undertaken as a part of the ongoing investigations of the Sustainable Cities Program at the University of Southern California pertaining to the connections between green space and ecological sustainability. For more information on the program please write to:



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### Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Melanie Beck, Brian Forist and Gary Machlis from the National Park Service.

The forty National Park Service volunteers who worked over the course of the survey, giving up their precious time in the interest of the National Recreation Area are gratefully acknowledged.

Thanks are also due to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC) and the Western National Parks Association (WNPA), for providing the funding for this project and to WNPA's Scott Aldrich for facilitating this support.

Special thanks are given to John Wilson who generously provided us with space in the University of Southern California's GIS Research Laboratory for the summer and to Denise Steiner from the Sustainable Cities Program who handled administrative issues with diligence and efficiency.

We would also particularly like to thank Steven Yoon from the Centers for Disease Control, Epidemiology Program Office, who kindly provided us with a copy of EpiInfo2000™, the software used for data analysis in this report.

Without the help of the above people, this report would not have been possible.

### Further Information

Should you have any questions about the survey, this report or the National Recreation Area, please refer to the following telephone numbers. They are provided for your assistance.

Questions about the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and / or Interagency Regional Trail Management Plan:

*National Park Service Visitor Center: (805) 370-2301*

Questions on Trail Management Plan:

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